

Governor Locke's Remarks Pipe Trades Conference June 20, 2000

I want to welcome all of the members of United Association to Washington State.

I have always believed that education is the fountainhead of opportunity and prosperity for all of us - the great equalizer. So I'd like to thank union members for being strong supporters of our public schools. And I'd like to thank you for creating the world's best model for adult training and education - apprenticeships.

No one is more committed to education than your organization. If all of the United Association's apprenticeship training program were a school district, it would be the largest in North America. This rigorous apprenticeship program requires a very high level of learning - in computer applications, computer aided design, compression, mechanics, plumbing and welding. In each of these areas, students must master the skills and knowledge - and prove that they can use what they've learned on the job.

And then, when they finally become journeymen, they have to update their skills every year to keep up with changing technology in their field. And this extraordinary program is paid for by you! In Washington State, plumbers and pipefitters contribute some 30 cents an hour of their wages to train the next generation of plumbers and pipefitters.

I'm sure you knew all this already, but I want to draw attention to it, because sometimes I think the labor movement takes its own strengths for granted. Forty percent of the new jobs in our economy are jobs that require vocational training after high school, but not a college degree. And many of these new jobs are unfilled - especially in Washington's growing high-tech industry. Yet at the same time that some of our companies are having to import people to fill good, family-wage jobs, we have thousands of workers in Washington State unemployed or working at poverty wages, all hungering for family wage jobs.

Our own Washington workers are plenty smart enough to fill these technical jobs, but they can only do that if we connect them with the training they need. But there are two problems. The first is that we need to work harder at creating the customized training that will prepare people for the new jobs our economy is creating.

The second problem is that a lot of people just don't believe that they're smart enough to go back to school. They think that education is for people in suits - people who work in offices. Maybe they had a hard time in school, or just didn't like sitting in a classroom listening to lectures. But different people learn in different ways. And there are lots of different kinds of smart people.

Obviously, plumbers have to be pretty brainy to get through that challenging apprenticeship program. And unlike people who get college degrees in literature or philosophy, plumbers are smart enough to get education and training that lead directly and immediately to a high-wage job. In fact, union apprenticeship programs have the best record of any education or training program for actually getting people into good jobs. And union apprenticeship programs work for people who like to learn by doing, rather than just listening to lectures.

So, I thank you for showing us the right way to do workforce training - and for serving the needs of Washington's smartest workers.

This is the reason why last fall I signed an executive order requiring that 15% of the labor on all large state construction projects be apprentices. With each building we build we are training the next generation of workers. This is an investment that makes sense.

That is also the reason why I implemented the first Project Labor Agreement in state government history last summer. The Clover Park Technical College Aerospace Center is being built under a model Project Labor Agreement to make certain that this construction project is built under a real partnership that ensures quality and prevents delays.

It is also the reason that I have asked my Welfare Reform Cabinet to put some real money into pre-apprenticeship programs for low-income workers so that more Washington citizens can learn the skills that will bring them family-wage jobs.

Right here in Seattle, I was proud to dedicate the Seattle Area Pipe Trades Training Center when I was King County Executive. This state of the art high tech center, which lies less a few miles from my former legislative district, is currently training hundreds of apprentices in Washington State. Despite the strengths of this program, we must redouble our efforts to recruit more young people into apprenticeships.

Retirements in the Building and Construction Trades are going to result in a skills gap of thousands of workers over the next five years. Now, more than ever, we have to reach out to public schools and community colleges and describe the real opportunities that the building and construction trades offer young people today and how attractive apprentice programs are.

Not only will these apprentices be gaining lifelong careers at family wages but also your industry ensures that all of the citizens in our country have safe and sanitary plumbing systems. All you have to do is travel abroad to realize how much we take for granted the public health created by your work and knowledge.

I believe in a building code for the plumbing industry that protects the health and safety of all Americans. That is why I have twice rejected efforts to impose a new code that had neither the track record or support from the men and women who take their public health responsibilities seriously - The United Association.

Finally, I want to thank you for being strong union members. Anyone who pays the least attention to history knows that the working people of this country became the middle class of this country through the struggles of the labor movement.

When unions are strong, the middle class is strong. In the eighties and nineties, when unions lost ground, the middle class lost ground. Fortunately, for all working Americans, last year 600,000 made a decision to join unions -- the largest gain in 25 years. And in the Building and Construction Trades, the actual percentage of workers represented by unions rose. You are becoming stronger. And because of that, America is becoming stronger.

So much of what we take for granted today, from the eight-hour day to health care to vacation time to unemployment insurance to prevailing wages, was created by the blood, sweat and tears of organized labor. And that is why I will always fight back any attacks on the rights of working people.

So thank you for being union members and thank you for truly understanding that education is our number one priority.

Thank you very much.